St. John G. Ervine Before Fame Hit Him

By BARRETT H. CLARK.

I WAS anxious to complete my Irish Odyssey by meeting some of the younger representatives of the Irish Theatre movement. Lennox Robinson I had met when the Irish Players were in America, but at that time he was so busy selling tickets and keeping his company out of the hands of the New York and Chicago police that he had no time for interviews or the exchange of ideas.

And when I was in Ireland I was told of his preoccupation with a volunteer army which was to start a revolution or suppress one in Cork. I had arranged to meet T. C. Murray, the schoolmaster-dramatist, author of *Birthright* and *Maurice Harte*, but the Sunday train schedule in Ireland, which means that there are no trains at all, deprived me of the pleasure of a visit to his home near Blarney.

A Protege of Shaw.

The author of *Mixed Marriage* was the third and last man of the group I particularly cared to see, and he lived in London. I had sometimes wondered how it was that a writer whose style was so distinctively national in tone had come to settle in London, and whether he intended to depict in his later work the people he had known and lived with. I had heard besides that he was a protege of Bernard Shaw. I was a little fearful lest Mr. Ervine should succumb to English influences and lose his characteristic style and flavor. I might ask him about this when I saw him.

St. John G. Ervine is now well known as the author of three rather widely read novels: *Mrs. Martin's Man, Alice and a Family*, and *Changing Winds*. In October, 1914, when I visited him at Hendon his name meant nothing to the public at large: he was merely one of a group of "rising" young Irishmen who had contributed a handful of grim dramatic studies concerned with the folk of the small towns and cities of Ulster. It was the young Irish dramatist I called on, the author of *Mixed Marriage* and *The Magnanimous Lover*, and not the novelist.

Bashful, Rosy Cheeked.

Mr. Ervine and his wife live in what looks like a model apartment. It is one of those bright new red brick buildings whose quaint architecture is inspired by Tudor castles. Hendon, or at least that part of Hendon where the Ervines live, is a new looking suburb of London, where queer little crescents wind in and about, losing themselves and the unwary wanderer, and finally coming out unexpectedly at the precise spot where one started from. I came upon the Arcade I was looking for in the middle of one afternoon in the fall of 1914, and climbed the narrow staircase to the second floor.

The door was opened by a bashful and rosy cheeked young man whom I would scarcely have taken for Mr. Ervine had not Bernard Shaw told me that his young friend was both bashful and rosy cheeked, and had I not heard the click of a typewriter just inside the door, which stopped short as I rang the bell. I stepped into a tiny apartment furnished throughout with the best of taste in the old English manner. We went into the dining room, which also did duty as a drawing room. I sat in the corner on a comfortable window seat, and Mr. Ervine opposite me on a chair.

A Puzzling Fellow.

Ervine was at that time in the early thirties. His youthful aspect was just a little surprising, for who does not figure to himself the stern aspect of the author of stern works? (Indeed, I find it hard to imagine the author of *Rutherford and Son* as a very young woman.) There was hardly a trace of the mental stress which must have gone to the making of *Mixed Marriage* on the countenance of its creator; unruffled serenity of soul and contentment with life could be read in the clear blue eyes, the unlined forehead. The voice was calm and steady, and the accent delightful, with its touch of the northern R, not unlike Bernard Shaw's.

It was not easy to get Mr. Ervine to talk about himself. Unlike a good many of his fellow countrymen, he was loath to talk, even about himself—or, rather, especially about himself—and I found myself wandering far afield from the subject I hoped he would eventually return to. I did, however, manage to extract a few facts from him, and was able to explain to myself what I had oftened wondered about: How it happened that St. John G.

ST. JOHN G. ERVINE.

Ervine, an Ulsterman and son of an Ulsterman and a Unionist, had come to identify himself with the Irish National Theatre at Dublin.

Ervine's father, though he was a Protestant, was a man of learning, and it is related that he studied the Gaelic language. He was not, therefore, a violent Protestant, and in all probability he did not instil in his son the traditional hatred of the South. Mr. Ervine told me that he had no doubt his education and the fact that he has not always lived in Ireland enabled him to view with an unbiased mind the struggles between North and South, to sympathize with both, and to recognize much of the absurdity and depict the tragedy which arise from these struggles.

Mixed Marriage, I said, could scarcely have been written by any Irishman who had seen only one side of the question. Ervine replied that he supposed that was so, adding that his sojourn for some years in England had probably enabled him to look at the Irish question with greater equanimity than if he had remained at home. He had always had ambitions to write, and was ever a voracious reader, indiscriminate and enthusiastic.

His years of apprenticeship were not vastly different, he said, from those of other writers, and he recounted the usual tales about rejected stories and essays and plays. He wrote for the newspapers for some years, but meantime experimented in the novel, the essay and the drama.

Mixed Marriage is Mr. Ervine's best play. Here, he said, is the clearest statement of his views on the Irish question. It is in no sense a thesis play, for it sets before us a human struggle, with living characters. The greater struggle of race against race, prejudice against prejudice and creed against creed forms the background. The tragedy of Ireland is a tragedy of misunderstanding. The sort of misunderstanding that causes war. In *Mixed Marriage* a Protestant father of Belfast opposes his son's marriage to a Catholic; his opposition is based entirely upon personal feeling.

Ervine, like T. C. Murray, is a dramatist by the grace of God. Murray once wrote me that *Birthright*, his best play, was written with no exact knowledge of dramatic technique. For two years after the production of *Birthright* the young dramatist read plays and studied dramatic construction; *Maurice Harte*, his next play, was admittedly far below *Birthright*. Ervine's experience was similar.

Candidus's Letter.

We were speaking of Shaw—indeed, one always returns to the subject—and Mr. Ervine showed me a long letter written to him by G. B. S. criticising *Jane Clegg*, a later play. I remember the drift of one sentence: "Of course, your play is no good . . . That is, for the professional stage." The letter ran to several typewritten pages, and was as full of sage advice as to royalties, contracts and what the music hall public wants as a letter of instructions from a vaudeville booking office to a coming dramatist.

St. John G. Ervine is not one of the dramatists who were hatched under the wing of the Abbey Theatre; he is willing of course to profit by the valuable experience of Lady Gregory and Mr. Yeats, but he is constantly experimenting. He kept sufficiently in touch with Ireland to write his most characteristic plays; he profited by his sojourn in England and produced *Jane Clegg*, a play of English life, but not content with being a dramatist, he turned to fiction and won a name for himself with his three novels.

Perhaps Mr. Ervine is still young enough artistically not to have found himself; perhaps he does not yet know exactly what he wants to do. He has been equally successful as dramatist and as novelist. Since 1915 he has been manager of the Abbey Theatre, where he produced one of his latest plays, *John Ferguson*. This play is concerned with the characters he knows best—the people of Ulster—and it may be surmised that his return to his native land marks a revival of interest in it.

For the time being, however, Mr. Ervine's literary work is interrupted. He was commissioned in the Dublin Fusiliers and a recent despatch said that as the result of wounds received in action he would lose a leg.

"The Ship of Death"

DR. EDWARD STILGEBAUER, a native of Frankfort-on-the Main, exiled himself in Switzerland in order to write *Love's Inferno*, his first attack upon Germany. It is forbidden to be sold or read there now, at least so the publishers tell us, and we are inclined to believe they are correct. If he ever went back to his country he must have left it again to write *The Ship of Death*, another attack which Brentano has just published. This time the attack is directed especially at the sinking of the Gigantic, i. e., the Lusitania.

One half of the book is devoted to the sailing and sinking of this "ship of death," told in eloquently dramatic style, with some really excellent character work. There is a religious fanatic aboard who monopolizes the conversation and exerts his uncanny influence for the general good of passengers and a beautiful American girl returning to England with her newborn infant and husband. Every one is familiar with the terrible course of events and so a great deal of this part will be repetition.

The fanatic leaves the boat when a tug comes to get the French mail, intimating that it makes no difference where he goes, as his ultimate destination is unquestionably a happy one. Feeling as he did about it, it would have seemed kinder to give his place on the tug to some one less sure of the future, but the passengers didn't mind, being thoroughly cowed by his powerful eye early in the voyage.

After the submarine has done its deadly work and is ready to start off again a woman's body is discovered tangled up in the propeller, and when brought to the captain is identified as that of the beautiful American previously mentioned, whom he once loved. The shock, coming as it does on the heels of the task just accomplished, is too great, and the first half of the book closes with the loss of his reason.

The second half is called *The Thirteen Reincarnations of Captain Stirn* and depicts his ravings in a German asylum. He imagines himself thirteen different victims of war horrors, in swift and terrible succession, and raves audibly to the spirit of the woman he once loved and has killed until a merciful death brings an end to his madness.

THE SHIP OF DEATH. By Edward Stilgebauer. Brentano's. $1.40.